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**UNIVERSITY OF  
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# 29<sup>th</sup> International Conference of the Society for Psychical Research

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## **Do Out-of-Body Experiencers Have Better Visual Imagery Skills than Non-Experiencers?**

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One key theory of the out-of-body experience (OBE) is that it is an imaginal experience, in part explained by the possession of better visual imagery skills by experiencers (OBEs) compared to non-experiencers (non-OBEs) (Blackmore, 1984). However, the research on this issue provides a mixed picture: Irwin (1980) found no evidence to suggest that OBEs were any more habitual 'visualizers' or 'imagers' than the normal population. OBEs also scored lower than the norms for that group would predict on a questionnaire assessing vividness of visual imagery. Blackmore (1983a) found no differences between OBEs and non-OBEs on a vividness of imagery scale, and no differences between a second OBE and non-OBE sample on Gordon's (1949) Control of Imagery Questionnaire. Some supporting evidence for Blackmore's (1984) thesis is available. Alvarado and Zingrone (1994) did find that vividness of mental imagery was positively correlated with the OBE. Further evidence in support of better imagery skills in OBEs includes Blackmore's (1983a) finding that OBEs were better able to switch viewpoints in imaginary scenes, although they did not remember scenes any more frequently from above than at eye-level. Cook and Irwin (1983) found that OBEs were better at judging how an object would appear from different perspectives, but found no relationship between having an OBE and performance on the Necker Cube Fluctuation Test of imagery.

A finding by Blackmore (1983b) that OBEs report more hypnagogic imagery than non-OBEs is sometimes cited as evidence for better imagery skills in OBEs. However the question used to assess this ('Have you ever experienced very vivid and realistic images just before going to sleep?') addresses experiences rather than measuring any specific imagery skill. It also presents problems of interpretation as many people who have an OBE might equate that experience with the one posed in the question. Both Irwin (1986) and Blackmore (1987) have found that people who dream as though they were spectators have more OBEs though there were no differences in the waking use of different viewpoints. Hunt et al. (1992) found a relationship between the OBE and performance of block design and embedded figures tests. Blackmore (1994) cites the findings of Irwin (1986) and herself (Blackmore, 1987) as generally confirming the predictions from her psychological theory of the OBE (Blackmore, 1984), although this glosses over the failure of an appreciable number of her own and other studies to find differences in the visual imagery skills of OBEs and non-OBEs.

The strongest evidence for better visual imagery skills in OBEs seems to be that offered in self-reports than actual performance on visual imagery tasks (Blackmore, 1983, 1987). This presentation will focus on a study designed to put this self-report evidence to objective measurement and test: namely one on paranormal belief and visual imagery.

In the study a total of 46 students completed a questionnaire on paranormal belief. They were then administered Blackmore's (1987) Imagination task, in which they were asked to imagine a number of familiar environments and their ability to switch imagined viewpoints within the scene (e.g. from eye-level to an above, over-head viewpoint). Next participants viewed a series of images displayed on a computer screen. The pictures were comprised of two sets: an OBE set in which participants first saw an eye-level picture followed by four overhead views of the same object (but in which the position of the object varied); and a recognition set in which one picture was followed by a choice of four from which the participants had to pick the image previously seen. After viewing the target image, participants were required to choose the corresponding image from the subsequent choice of four. They were asked to do this as quickly as possible as their response time was being measured. The findings of this study indicated that there was a positive correlation between the self-report on the imagination task and actual performance on the computer task for the OBE picture set. However, there was a negative correlation between belief in the paranormal and number of correct choices on the OBE picture set.

The latter finding is interesting for two main reasons: first, because there is a body of literature demonstrating certain 'faulty' probabilistic reasoning and task performance patterns by people high in paranormal belief (e.g. Musch and Ehrenberg, 2002); second, because OBErs tend to report higher levels of paranormal belief than non-OBErs (e.g. Tobacyk et al. 1982, Glickson, 1990). Given that people who report prior OBEs tend to score on average 50% higher on measures of paranormal belief than non-OBErs (see Murray and Fox, 2004), this leads us to hypothesize that OBErs will not demonstrate the same positive correlation between self-report on Blackmore's imagination task and performance on the computer task, and that OBErs will perform below that of a non-OBE sample. The presentation end with a brief comparison of the findings from this study and similar trials run with OBErs.